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UNCLAS OTTAWA 001098

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CANADIAN POLITICS: QUEBEC LIBERAL PARTY

VICTORY--WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

REF: QUEBEC 55

1. By most accounts, the surprise victory of the Quebec Liberal Party (QLP) in the April 14 elections has sounded the death knell for the separatist agenda. In the words of one pundit, QLP leader Jean Charest "is the first unambiguous federalist to head a Quebec government in decades, a sign of how much sovereignty (...) has turned into a dormant issue." At the same time, Bloc Quebecois (the federal party) leader Gilles Duceppe and others assert that 45 percent of Quebec remains "sovereigntist" at heart and will keep the hope of a separate Quebec alive by voting for the Bloc nationally.

2. Both PM Chretien and his likely successor, Paul Martin, have said they are pleased with the electoral outcome. Martin graciously attributed this "federalist" victory in Quebec to the retiring PM's tenacity on federation throughout his tenure in politics. Other observers of the federal-provincial dynamic, however, caution that Charest, for all his "federalist" credentials, is a strong proponent of decentralization and thus likely to be more of a thorn in the side of government on health care, housing, and other issues that depend on federal funding allotments. Nonetheless, the prospect of not having to deal with the issue of sovereignty bodes well for Canada's next Prime Minister, whoever he or she may be. As the constitutional critic for the Opposition (Canadian Alliance) told the press, this is the first time in a long while that the threat of a referendum "will not be hanging over our head."

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